

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES—Tuesday, February 15, 2000

The House met at 9:30 a.m.

MORNING HOUR DEBATES

The SPEAKER. Pursuant to the order of the House of January 19, 1999, the Chair will now recognize Members from lists submitted by the majority and minority leaders for morning hour debates. The Chair will alternate recognition between the parties, with each party limited to not to exceed 30 minutes, and each Member except the majority leader, the minority leader or the minority whip limited to not to exceed 5 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Oregon (Mr. BLUMENAUER) for 5 minutes.

LIVABLE COMMUNITIES

Mr. BLUMENAUER. Mr. Speaker, for people who care about livable communities, the D.C. metropolitan area is either a test case or a basket case; sometimes it is both.

In terms of quality of life for the commuter, the experience in recent decades commands a horrid fascination. Between 1982 and 1994, there was a 69 percent increase in the time D.C. area commuters spent stuck in traffic. The average speed on the Beltway has decreased from 47 miles an hour to 23 miles per hour.

In D.C., we are told that the average commuter spends 76 hours a year stuck in traffic; that is almost 10 working days sitting in the car absolutely immobile. In Northern Virginia this summer, nearly 1 out of every 3 days was in violation of ozone clean air standards.

Mr. Speaker, of course, it is no secret that in this metropolitan area we are sprawling far more rapidly than we increase in population. From 1970 to 1990, Metropolitan Washington population grew 25 percent, yet the area that we consume increased over 60 percent.

The suburbs here grew by a population of 18.3 percent while the District itself lost 17 percent of its residents. In the first 7 years of the 1990s, the District was hemorrhaging one person every hour.

There are solutions which we know will not work; one is trying to simply pave our way out of congestion. The congestion in the United States will triple over the next 15 years, even if we increase capacity 20 percent.

The same people who tell us that we have the second worst congestion in the country found that, despite roughly \$30.8 billion spent by urban areas to

add more vehicle lanes, congestion levels remained almost identical to urban areas that did not.

Mr. Speaker, of course, here we do not have any thoughtful regional land use. But at an era of smart growth, we seem to be continuing to engage in dumb growth, like putting a massive stadium with huge public subsidy out in the middle of nowhere where it is virtually inaccessible any way other than by car and then being surprised when on opening day it is jammed and some people actually are abandoning their cars to get to the game.

We continue to scatter development throughout the region away from Metro stations and designated growth sites. There are things that can, in fact, work and make a difference.

Last week in Atlanta, Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater launched the Commuter Choice Initiative, a program that was created in TEA-21 to provide \$65 a month in tax-free transit or vanpool benefits for employees in both the private and the public sector.

While this effort is a step in the right direction, we in Congress need to make sure that the Federal Government leads by example. Unfortunately, here in our congested metropolitan area, there is no uniform program or policy for our Federal employees, yet 350,000 Federal employees make up the majority of people who work here in and near transit.

There is no uniform parking or commuter policy across the Federal Government. The costs and subsidy for parking varies, different levels of transit subsidy.

Mr. Speaker, the administration is looking at an Executive order for Federal transportation in the National Capital region. This Executive order that they are looking at would require each Federal agency in the region to support transit and commercial vanpool benefits, to increase carpool and vanpool benefits, encourage bicycle and walking and provide shuttle service between transit points and agency workplaces where appropriate.

Last week, the gentleman from Virginia (Mr. WOLF) introduced legislation that would make this happen much faster via the legislative route. His bill would expand Federal employee commuter options and accept the Federal Government's responsibility as the single largest employer in the Capital region to reduce traffic congestion and air pollution.

Mr. Speaker, I am excited about the gentleman from Virginia's leadership

and the way that the administration is moving. I hope, however it is done, that we do not let an extra minute go by. People who are caught in traffic as we speak this moment deserve the best from the Federal Government to make our communities more livable, to make our families safe, healthy, and economically secure.

Having a uniform comprehensive approach to the Federal Government's transportation issues in the metropolitan region is an important step in that direction.

THE CBO REPORTS ON MEDICARE HMOs

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. OSE). Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentleman from Iowa (Mr. GANSKE) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. GANSKE. Mr. Speaker, remember when we debated the Bipartisan Consensus Managed Care Reform Act here on the floor about 3 months ago, and the HMO industry said the sky will fall, the sky will fall; premiums will go out of site.

We get the accurate answer, the accurate answer from the Congressional Budget Office, which has analyzed the bill which passed this floor by a vote of 275 to 151.

What did the CBO say would be the cost? The CBO said that over 5 years, the cost of premiums would go up 4.1 percent total. Now, this is important to understand.

All my colleagues should listen. The HMO industry will say 4.1 percent each year. Wrong. That is not what the CBO report says. In fact, I talked to a CBO staffer, Tom Bradley, last night and he said that in the first year there would be almost no effect. In the second, third, fourth and fifth years, premiums would go up about 1 percent over what they normally would be because of this legislation.

To my friends who debated this liability issue so vigorously, who said liability will cost so much, well look at what the CBO said. The CBO said when it looked at the bipartisan consensus bill that the largest single coster was not liability. The largest single coster in our bill is the internal and external appeals process, at 1.3 percent. Why is that? Well, because they recognize that HMOs are inappropriately denying care and that if a patient has an opportunity to take that denial of care to an independent peer panel, that about 50

□ This symbol represents the time of day during the House proceedings, e.g., □ 1407 is 2:07 p.m.

Matter set in this typeface indicates words inserted or appended, rather than spoken, by a Member of the House on the floor.

percent of the time they are going to overrule the denial of care by the HMO and provide one with the care that they deserve and is justified and is medically necessary.

There is another reason why this report is so interesting, and that is that the CBO estimate for the Senate bill shows an increase of about 1.3 percent over 4 years.

Now some would say that is great. I would point out that that is a recognition that the Senate bill does almost nothing. It only covers about 43 million people. It does not cover the 160 million people that our bill covers, and it does not have an effective internal and external appeals process, because if one looks at the fine language in the Senate bill, it still says at the end of the day that an HMO can say whatever they want is medically necessary or is not. Whereas our bill, the bill that passed this House, addresses that issue.

Mr. Speaker, I would advise Members to look at this; but to remember this, that when they look at that 4.1 percent, it is cumulative over 5 years. That, in effect, is about the cost to the average consumer of one Big Mac per month. That is what we are talking about in terms of the cost, not an excessive amount for people to know that all that money they are currently spending on their health care premiums will actually mean something if they get sick.

Mr. Speaker, I just briefly wanted to mention a report by the Inspector General for Medicare. She looked at Medicare HMOs. We are all concerned about fraud and abuse. This is what the Inspector General found that Medicare HMOs are charging the Federal Government for: \$250,000 in meetings for gifts, food, alcoholic beverages, at only one HMO; \$190,000 for a sales award meeting in Puerto Rico for one Medicare HMO; \$160,000 for a party celebrating a Medicare HMO's parent company's 150th anniversary; \$25,000 for leasing a luxury box suite at a professional sports arena by a Medicare HMO; \$106,000 for sporting events and theater tickets at four Medicare HMOs; \$70,000 for holiday parties at three Medicare HMOs; \$37,000 for wine, gifts, flowers, gift certificates, insurance brokers and employees at one Medicare HMO; \$3,000 for a massage therapist for an employee at one Medicare HMO.

When the HMOs say that they are really hurting and that we need to increase their Federal dollars, maybe we ought to ask them, gee, maybe the tension is so much that they will need that massage therapist.

THE PEOPLE OF NAGORNO KARABAGH MUST HAVE A SEAT AT THAT TABLE WITH AZERBAIJAN AND ARMENIA

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of Jan-

uary 19, 1999, the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. PALLONE) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. PALLONE. Mr. Speaker, this week the president of the Republican of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev, is visiting our Nation's Capital. President Aliyev is scheduled to meet with President Clinton this morning at the White House. He will also be holding meetings with Secretary of State Albright and Energy Secretary Richardson.

I would like to take this opportunity, Mr. Speaker, to express my hope that President Clinton and the other officials in his administration will use these meetings to urge President Aliyev to work in good faith for Azerbaijan for an Azerbaijan-negotiated settlement to the Nagorno Karabagh conflict.

In particular, it is imperative that Mr. Aliyev be urged to accept the direct participation of representatives from Nagorno Karabagh in the negotiations. In the minds of many, the Nagorno Karabagh conflict is viewed as a bilateral dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan. While these two countries must obviously be part of the negotiations in the final settlement, the people of Karabagh who have their own democratically elected government must have a seat at that table. After all, it is their homeland and their lives that are at stake in this peace process. No one else should be allowed to make these life and death decisions for them.

Mr. Speaker, the United States is one of the cochairs of the Minsk Group, the body under the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the OSCE, charged with facilitating a negotiated settlement to this dispute.

More than a year ago, the U.S. and our Minsk Group partners put forth a plan for resolving this conflict known as the common state approach. Despite their serious reservations, both Armenia and Nagorno Karabagh previously accepted this framework as the basis for negotiations while Azerbaijan rejected it. We do not necessarily need to be wedded to this one approach for jump starting the negotiations, but we should use occasions like this week's visit by President Aliyev to call for all sides to get back to the negotiating table with no preconditions.

I expect that President Aliyev will use this occasion, this meeting with the President, to call for the lifting of section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, a provision of U.S. law that prohibits direct American government aid to Azerbaijan until that country lifts its blockades of Armenia and Nagorno Karabagh. President Aliyev, backed up by the support of major oil companies, has been lobbying American officials to repeal section 907.

In 1998, this Congress rejected an amendment to the foreign operations bill that would have repealed section

907 and we must hold the line. Azerbaijan has failed to meet the basic condition for lifting section 907, namely, that it take demonstrable steps to lift the blockades it has imposed on its neighbors, and such intransigence should not be rewarded. I call on our administration to use this occasion to stress to the Azerbaijani president that the ball is in his court and that the only way to lift the ban on U.S. aid is for Azerbaijan to lift the blockade.

Mr. Speaker, Presidents Aliyev and Kocharian, President Kocharian of Armenia, have been meeting on a number of occasions at multilateral meetings where both countries are represented, and I welcome these direct talks and hope that they will continue.

Azerbaijan and Armenia must normalize their relations with one another. They have to work for greater economic integration, development of infrastructure, and cooperation in other areas. This is the path that President Aliyev must be encouraged to follow. Indeed, the benefits to his country would be significant by opening up trade investment and assistance, that these benefits cannot begin to flow to Azerbaijan until Azerbaijan lifts its blockades against Armenia and Karabagh. I truly hope Mr. Aliyev will hear this message and not continue to believe he can play the oil card, trying to use Azerbaijan's presumed oil reserves as a way of getting the U.S. to sell out the principle behind section 907.

Mr. Speaker, last week at a White House ceremony to accept the credentials of Armenia's new ambassador to the United States, President Clinton pledged to aid Armenia to achieve a durable and mutually acceptable resolution to the conflict over Nagorno Karabagh. President Clinton also praised President Kocharian and President Aliyev for their willingness to act boldly for peace. He stressed America's commitment to helping Armenia-established democratic institutions and a market economy, and noted that the progress made by the Armenian people means that the U.S. can shift our assistance from humanitarian aid to development projects.

Unfortunately, the President's fiscal year 2001 budget proposal actually calls for a 27 percent reduction in assistance to Armenia. Congress will have an opportunity to reverse this, and I intend to work hard to make sure that the assistance is actually increased.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I want to renew my call for Armenia's President Robert Kocharian to be extended an invitation for a state visit to Washington. Last November 25, my colleagues in the House joined me in a bipartisan call on President Clinton to extend the invitation to President Kocharian.

I see one of my colleagues on the Republican side, the gentlewoman from